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Convocation Address

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Outline of address to be given by Gordon Keith Chalmers at commencement exercises, Ohio State University, March 17, 1944.

Routine and Work

The work which you have done in your own mind in college should continue. It is more important than the job you will do.

It is misleading to distinguish between going to college and going to work. Much that is called work is routine. No one pretends that routine is unimportant: it earns our daily bread and provides for our fellows; but we should recognize it for what it is, namely, doing over and over what others have done over and over.

College has started you on the way to something far deeper and more significant than routine. That is work. Work changes something, moves something, or lifts it. In the world it begins with your thoughts. Only if you can think up ways to improve or shorten or make more effective the routine of your job will you be doing the work of the world. It is altogether possible to go through your whole life and draw your wages without ever working, receiving pay not for work, but for routine. The university is here to help you find out how to go beyond what you will be paid for, and this extra, beyond the line of duty, will be work.

The adjective most commonly coupled with routine is <u>dull</u> -- dull routine. Sad to say, for most people in the mechanical age the routine is monotonous (no doubt it was also monotonous for most men in the age of feudal castles and the age of the shepherds). The surprising thing about routine is that many men and women have made it altogether satisfactory. If your acquaintance is wide you doubtless know at least one person who rises to the day's tasks with peace of mind and a quiet

relish, finding in the things his fathers taught him how to do such solid pleasure that the very sunlight, the tones of peoples' voices, and the greetings in the street though an old story, to him bring pleasant surprises. There are many celebrations of this monotony; the novels of Willa Cather record them; so do the year's holidays, which combine in our thoughts about them both an historical event and the customs and feelings attached to the seasons when they come. The routine recurrence of Christmas at its time of year, George Washington's birthday, Decoration Day, the Fourth of July, Labor Day, and Thanksgiving is meaningful to us within its monotony.

What frees routine from dullness is another kind of work -- reflective work, inner work. Behind the ordered life in Nebraska, Canada, New Mexico of Miss Cather's novels there lies the informed intellectual work of those who live it. So it is with our celebrations of the seasons and the holidays; so it is in the daily life of any of those clear-spirited people whom you may think of as finding routine not dull but attractive. The Orient has been especially adept and successful at this kind of work, called by the people of India inner strenuousness and employed also by the Chinese. Americans have come to think of reflection as the idle fancy of a summer's day, the invitation to relax and invite the soul. Thus the tougher and more critical intellectual work of college -- philosophy, history, literature, pure mathematics -- has come to be thought of as a holiday from real life and its problems, an ivory tower, a green bower of elegance and decoration called "culture." That critical intellectual work is, in fact, the precise opposite, it is the necessary condition of making routine tolerable and meaningful.

Inner work consists in mastering and using those basic ideas which govern our nature as men. Only by inner work, for example, may one discover that freedom is not a simple and easy idea but complex and difficult, involving restraint, discipline, and a type of authority ten times more elaborate than the outward authority of a dictator. To a man unskilled and uninformed in inner work there is a bitter contradiction in the proposal that free men may govern themselves, for it requires that one and the same man be at once governed and free.

So inner work is necessary not only if the routine of our life is to become attractive; it is necessary also to what I have called the work of the world -- that is, all those tasks beyond the line of duty which make the routine shorter, better, and more effective. For us, the work of the world now consists in winning the war; soon it will consist in trying to make the peace both just and durable. To attempt this latter task in routine fashion, repeating and elaborating all that has been done before to make peace, but stopping there, will unquestionably mean failure. Only by drawing heavily upon the fruits of inner work may we hope this time to do better what has been done so badly in the settlement of previous wars. Men who know only routine, no matter how worthy the routine may be, will be unable to make the difficult decisions; as voters they will be unable to support the difficult decisions of a world settlement following a world war.

You will hear people say that you are now leaving college and going to work. To put a precise meaning upon the term <u>work</u> we should, instead, say that many of you are in danger now of leaving work to lead a life of routine. Whenever in your college years by inner

strenuousness you put together for yourself some important ideas about our nature as men, about human destiny, about the laws of political organization or the principles evident in the behavior of matter, you did some work. As bachelors of Arts or of Science, as Masters or Doctors you will be expected to continue to enlarge your knowledge and your skill with those fundamental ideas which make possible for you inner work. I do not say simply that you have this opportunity. I say that you are expected to do this. It was to make possible this inner work that the university was founded. In its hour of testing, this inner work is the greatest need of the United States. We need it to guide and temper our treatment of racial and other minorities, our arrangements between employer and employee, our provision for under-privileged and unemployed; we need it for determining our commitments, both military and political, with allies and former enemies when the war is won.

It is this inner work which has made our routine daily life wholesome, and this also is a national as well as a personal need. It is a duty, and like all duties, hard. You began to fulfill it whenever in college you began seriously, inside your own mind and heart, to think seriously. It would be a mistake at this point in your progress if I did not also remind you that of all the pursuits of man for those able and equipped it is also the most rewarding and in consequence, the most pleasant.